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Of *Good Averages* and *Happy Mediums:* Orientations towards an *Average* in Urban Housing

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Abstract

The paper focusses on the relation between references to an "average" and urban developments of crowding or increases in rents. The occurrence of normative orientations towards an "average" in diverse fields – such as debates on work-life balance and medium achievements in the workplace or goals to keep up with average performances in leisure sport – serves as a starting point to investigate the role of the "average" in urban housing. Based on qualitative interviews, discourse analysis and fieldwork in the *Rathenauviertel* and other districts in Cologne, it asks how ideas of an "average" feature discursively in urban housing and how they are connected to other fields. The paper starts by outlining the prevalence of orientations towards the middle in different fields and specifically in the realm of housing. It proceeds by highlighting how notions of the middle are conveyed in advertisements, how they are tied to normative presuppositions and what impact they have on esthetics and materializations. The paper shows how perceptions of public space change with shifts in urban housing and conditions of appropriateness are adjusted. It concludes by arguing that orientations towards the middle in urban housing can be understood as an interplay between external pressures, normative orientations and justifications.

Keywords: housing, average, normativity, Cologne, esthetics, public space

Introduction

Modalities of urban housing are mostly restricted by physical, financial and structural factors. The choice of residential districts, the size of accommodations or forms of cohabitation are contingent on rent price, income, infrastructure or space, even more so in the face of urban developments of crowding or increasing rents. In addition to economic and infrastructural factors, lifestyle, social relationships or the appeal of districts have an influence on housing decisions. How much you earn, where your friends live, how easy or hard it is to find a flat and how much you like a certain district – all these are important factors of choosing or being content with the location of a flat. Furthermore, political stances or ideas of a "good life" feature in housing choices: Sociopolitical attitudes or normative orientations and preferences for a specific milieu and lifestyle are influential for the selection of location, flat size or preferred building types as well.

Perceptions of "good averages" or "happy mediums" feature increasingly in such debates, specifically when housing choices are rationalized: The modalities of urban housing are framed as a balance between rent and size as well as the "right" amount of space and the "appropriate" amount of rent – both situated neither at the top nor at the bottom of the spectrum of rent price or square meter size. The "middle" as a rhetoric and social comparative plays a role when tenants of relatively small flats in attractive districts argue that they do not need more space or that the location's benefits outweigh high rents. This is especially the case for urban trend districts with high rents, a competitive housing market and predominantly smaller flats. My research on one of these trend districts, the *Rathenauviertel* in Cologne, has shown that spatial constrictions and financial costs are put in relation to concepts of moderation; references to perceptions of the "middle" are used to justify external pressures and partly reframe them as positive. Living in small spaces in central urban areas is portrayed as having advantages and being suitable to an ethical lifestyle, however, demarcations are drawn both against rents which are too expensive or overly luxurious flats as well as against dwellings which are too small and low quality. It is about finding the right amount, the "good average" and "happy medium" in relation to the specific lifeworlds of social groups in trend districts.

While processes of crowding and increasing rents are factors contributing to such references, this paper is interested in the specific constellation in which they are voiced, ranging from claims by tenants in the district, the presence of concepts of the "middle" in advertisements, normative perceptions, esthetics, materializations and planning logics. The occurrence of normative orientations towards an "average" in diverse fields – such as debates on work-life balance and medium achievements in the workplace or goals to keep up with average performances in leisure sport – serves as a starting point to investigate the role of the "average" in urban housing.[1] The paper is about the relation between references to an "average" and urban developments of crowding or increases in rents. Based on qualitative interviews, discourse analysis and fieldwork in the *Rathenauviertel* and other districts in Cologne, it asks how ideas of an "average" feature discursively in urban housing and how they are connected to other fields. In the course of the paper, I will shed light on some developments contributing to this theme and highlight some pertinent dimensions of interest to a cultural analysis of this topic. By bringing them together, I claim neither causality nor their belonging to

1 The paper on "good averages" and "happy mediums" in urban housing is part of a bigger project on the "middle" and perceptions of an average as a positive point for orientation in diverse fields of practice. The project takes its departure from the observation that orientations towards the middle are common in fields such as work, leisure and housing. It is based on qualitative interviews, mainly in the fields of work, recreational sport and housing and, furthermore, includes historical perspectives on the emergence of the middle as a point of reference for social comparisons.

a well-delineated trend but aim to outline different aspects of a specific constellation which applies to a specific group or groups in districts such as the *Rathenauviertel*. However, I argue that orientations towards the middle can also be found in other fields and contexts and that it is a powerful concept, structuring perceptions, expectations and practices in the realm of housing and other areas.

The paper starts by outlining the prevalence of orientations towards the middle in different fields and specifically in a trend district in Cologne. It proceeds by highlighting how notions of the middle are conveyed in advertisements and are tied to normative presuppositions and what impact they have on esthetics and materializations. The paper shows how perceptions of public space change with shifts in urban housing and conditions of appropriateness are adjusted. It concludes by arguing that orientations towards the middle in urban housing can be understood as an interplay between external pressures, normative orientations and justifications.

Mediocrity, Medium, Average

Orientations towards the middle are a form of social comparative (Nullmeier 2016), a form of orientation that both draws a line against the bottom and against the top. In contrast to competitions, such orientations do not seek the best, but rather a medium position, a "good average" or a "happy medium" with which one is content (or claims to be content). They are socially constructed and gain traction through their relation to relevant social categories: Instead of being defined by objective or neutral factors, such as mathematical medians or statistic evidence, they are placed in reference to situated criteria. Friends, family or colleagues serve as points of reference rather than objective scales. What is understood as the "middle" is dynamically constructed and is contingent on personal living conditions. An average income to one person means something different to another; similarly, a sport performance can be perceived of by an individual as more than average at the point of its execution, but after two years of hard training, it can be deemed too low and not appropriate. Expectations and perceptions of the "middle" change over time and with shifting social conditions. The "middle" is flexible as it compares positions – in terms of income, housing situation, performance and other criteria – to the specific social context.

"Keeping up" with the midfield, achieving middle incomes or belonging to the middle class are increasingly powerful models for socioeconomic behavior and imaginaries. This is mirrored in recent sociological studies where the "civil normal biography" is preferred over "excessive luxury" (Calmbach et al. 2016) or where "conformity" with the middle class (Koppetsch 2013) is highlighted as a favorable goal. But how are notions of the "middle" and "mediocrity" – not as analytic terms but as terms and concepts prevalent in lifeworlds – referenced in diverse fields of practice? How does the

usually negatively connoted notion of "mediocrity" experience a reinterpretation to more positive images of balance, virtues of modesty, moderation in face of discussions on degrowth, wastefulness, sustainability, slowing down or work-life balance?

While the fields in which notions of "happy mediums" and "good averages" are referenced are very diverse and connected to diverging logics of practice, interpretations and structural specificities, the notions themselves stem from similar debates and discourses and share many commonalities. The "middle" is a powerful concept to structure action and perceptions. Orientations towards the middle in diverse fields merit deeper scrutiny to show how they are constituted in specific settings and constellations, which discourses they reference, how they relate to debates on competition and performance or how they are referenced to make sense of economic and social conditions.

Examples of the prevalence of the middle as a guiding concept are the sphere of work where sabbaticals, part-time work and home office schemes as well as the aforementioned *work-life balance* have become increasingly common. This is mirrored in interview statements from my project, arguing that the professional career is perceived of as less important than a happy and balanced life. While this is, in the first place, a voluntary limitation leading to less income and slimmer career chances, it is also argued as a positive choice leading to a happier life and less pressure from work. In the sphere of leisure, for example, in recreational road cycling as a sport, this orientation towards the middle, towards averages and, thus, also to some extent normalized performances is prevalent as well: Hobby cyclists argue that their motivation is not to win a race or to be the best, but to achieve good performances relative to friends, their age group or their own performance in previous years (Groth 2014). Belonging to the midfield is argued as an achievement of its own and framed as desirable; overly extensive training durations and aspirations are, in this context, seen in a negative way, as much as bad performances are. There is an interplay both in the sphere of work and in the sphere of leisure, between voluntary self-limitation – being content to belong to the middle – and external constrictions – not being able to achieve more than the middle due to economic or social pressure and constraints. Work and sports are two exemplary fields in which orientations towards the middle can be observed. However, developments and shifts towards a "new modesty" also play a big role in the sphere of housing, both in interviews I conduct and in diverse publications, events, social movements, materializations and esthetic dimensions. A common theme in these diverse sources is a focus on notions of mediocrity, averages or mediums. The middle, as a concept which structures actions and interpretations, is prevalent in making sense of housing situations.

Cologne: *Rathenauviertel*

My research on housing and notions of *good averages* and *happy mediums* focuses on Cologne, more specifically on the district of *Rathenauviertel*. Cologne, with roughly 1 million inhabitants, is Germany's fourth biggest city. Crowding and ongoing processes of urbanization shape Cologne as the number of inhabitants grows continually, whereas the number of newly built flats does not suffice or keep up. Rents are increasing in Cologne, where people pay 30 percent more than the German average (Wagner 2016). This is especially the case for trend districts: The *Rathenauviertel* has the highest rents in Cologne (12.50 EUR per square meter on average, with significantly higher rents for restored buildings). It has seen a percent increase in rents over the last two years, and there is a tendency towards smaller flats, with flat sizes an average of eight square meters smaller compared to developments in other parts of Germany (CityNEWS 2014). With its rising rents, a highly competitive housing market, restoration, relatively small apartments and a strong appeal for young families and singles, the district is a typical example of a trend district in an inner-city area. In spite of criticism against "luxury restorations" (Risse 2013) and gentrification, this is partly described as a positive development towards an attractive district and a valorization of the neighborhood.

Cologne has a highly differentiated neighborhood structure, the so-called *Veedel* (vernacular for *Viertel*, district), featuring different supply structures regarding shops, cafés and restaurants. The building styles of districts differ significantly with occurrences of appealing historic buildings spread thinly in a city where most neighborhoods were destroyed during WW II. The distribution of green spaces and parks also has an influence on the attractiveness of districts, and the *Rathenauviertel* offers both many attractive pre-WW II residential buildings and access to green spaces in the direct vicinity. It adds to the attractiveness of this district that the emergence and presence of trend districts affects social relations: They serve as meeting places and attract other tenants. The decision to move to a different district does not only depend on infrastructure, architectural features or leisure facilities, but also on whether friends and members of similar social groups are already living there.

My research on urban housing in Cologne's *Rathenauviertel* and, more generally, on developments in urban housing shows the prevalence of notions of the middle or average in making sense of and legitimizing housing conditions: Smaller flats, increasing rents and confined possibilities for urban housing are core aspects of living in the district, especially so for younger families, couples and singles moving into the district in recent years. References to perceptions of the middle or the average are tangible in different ways in conversations and interviews with inhabitants of the *Rathenauviertel*. One instance are arguments that living in small apartments can outweigh excessive

square meter sizes and plenty of rooms when they are not too small and when their quality is not too low. Here, the notion of a good average takes effect in the form of a demarcation against both too much and too little, sketching out a zone which is deemed an appropriate compromise between these two poles. Similarly, practical ground plans, good room divisions and reflections on sustainability are referenced to argue against flats which are too big and wasteful. Again, negative aspects of big apartments are highlighted as long as other factors – such as quality, practicality and location – can be framed to be in favor of small apartments. Big apartments are unattainable to many in districts like the *Rathenauviertel*, both regarding general availability and affordability. However, they feature in conversations, interviews and publications as a reference against which notions of averages or mediums in housing are constructed.
This can be understood partly as a reaction to increased rents and less space. In times of crowding, an extremely competitive market for flats in inner-city areas and difficulties in the search for bigger flats, orientations towards the middle are one way to make sense of one's situation in the realm of housing. It is a form of sweet-talking unaffordability and socioeconomic problems of a relatively privileged group of young families, couples and singles who want to live in the inner-city trend districts. Furthermore, it is one way in which such social groups under pressure make sense of a crisis in urban housing. However, it should not be understood as a unidirectional causality between a difficult situation in housing and resulting (re-)orientations towards the middle. Rather, it is worth scrutinizing the constellation of the current housing situation in districts like the *Rathenauviertel*. In addition to infrastructural factors, it consists of imaginaries, materializations, esthetic dimensions and normative presuppositions connected to references to the middle and mediocrity. Which expressions of them exist in such a constellation? What debates and trends contribute to the importance of the middle in it? And what are some of the effects of orientations towards the middle? In the following, this paper will present some aspects of this constellation, ranging from advertisements to interior design and the use of public space, where the middle is positioned as a form of leitmotif by some actors in the field of urban housing.

Advertising and Consuming Normativity

In an advertisement on furniture and interior design accessories, *Tchibo* – a large German retailer – featured the slogan: "Less is more – more and more people are of this opinion" (Tchibo 2016). Two things are of interest regarding this slogan: Firstly, it is a normative claim with – albeit rather implicit – references to debates on minimalism, sustainability and critical consumerism. In the context of furniture and interior design, it is not only the esthetic principle made famous by modern architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, advocating for open spaces, clear lines and against superfluous

ornamentation (Johnson 1947). It is, furthermore, both a rejection of excessive or indiscriminate consumption and unsustainable lifestyles coupled with the promise that this can have positive effects and "is more": Decluttering, reduction and consuming the right "things", following the logic of the text accompanying the advertisement on *Tchibo*'s website, lead to happier lives. Secondly, the slogan and the advertisement text frame the orientation of "less is more" as a social trend which is shared by "more and more people". It hints that it is not only an individual orientation, but, if not consensus, the shared view of a growing group of people and that it has a fundamentally social dimension. In the advertisement, *Tchibo* makes clear that two reasons for the trend of "less is more" are "increasing rents" and "urban crowding". As external forces, they apply pressure on occupants to adjust to smaller spaces. While they are referenced at the beginning, the rest of the text takes a different tone and speaks about "opening up new possibilities": Creativity and decluttering, the conscious selection of furnishings and sharing things and space with others are portrayed as positive aspects rather than negative constrictions.

Tchibo is not alone with their reference to reduction and minimalism in the realm of interior design. Indeed, "less is more" and a focus on essentials are an ongoing trend. At the *IMM Cologne* 2017, the international furniture fair, the so-called flagship house – a format featuring a concept house as a model vision for future living – was called the "Sustenance" or "Elementarist House" – not excessive in layout or furnishings, but modest, of high quality and "reducing the elements to their essential" (Todd Bracher Studio n. d.). Designed by American, Todd Bracher, the "Haus" was a convergence of esthetic and normative dimensions: Housing is tied to a way of life subscribing to ecological principles of sustainability, mirrored in furnishings and floor plans. At the 2018 edition of the *IMM* 2018, Czech designer Lucie Koldova was in charge of the concept house, again presenting a minimalist design (IMM Spotlight 2017) with a focus on "dematerialization" and an understanding of "light as a feel-good factor and source of life" which results in needing "fewer other things" (Scharnigg 2018). Both concept houses reflect a tendency towards minimalist interior design lacking excessive ornamentation and connecting esthetic with emotive and normative dimensions. Both IMM 2017 and 2018 showed a generally strong trend towards minimalism and reduction. A focus on living in small spaces was tangible throughout the fair – and most notably so in the high-price segment.[2] This was described in a German newspaper report on the *IMM* 2018 as a move to "clarity" and a "detox for the home" (Scharnigg 2018). Apart

2 Author's fieldnotes from IMM 2017 (January 2017) and IMM 2018 (January 2018). As one ventured further through the trade fair and towards the lower price segment in the halls at the far end of the trade fair site, however, reduction and minimalism were no longer the guiding motives. Particularly in the lower price segments, minimalism and reduction were not guiding motives.

from the *IMM*, there are numerous examples in blogs, books, magazines and advertisements featuring this move to modesty, reduction, living in smaller spaces, and sustainable and high quality furniture.
A relatively young trend, framing modesty in interior design and other areas as a Scandinavian virtue is related. The big furniture retailer *IKEA* dedicates an extensive subsite on their homepage to illustrate the concept:

> *Lagom:* It's a simple Swedish philosophy on everyday life that means "just the right amount". An idea that we can strike a healthy balance with the world around us without having to make extreme changes, and without denying ourselves anything. With *Lagom* in mind, we think you can live a more sustainable, healthy and cost-conscious life at home, without any dramatic upheaval (IKEA n. d.).

In this advertisement campaign, there is also a normative thrust positing that consumption choices are tied to normative issues of sustainability, a healthy lifestyle or conscious consumption. Furniture and interior design are not limited to functionality or esthetics but are portrayed as enabling or mirroring virtues. In a series of video clips featured on *IKEA*'s *Lagom* website, sixteen people tell how they apply the concept to their lives: From saving energy and space to recycling, gardening and volunteer work – all with *IKEA* furniture in the background. The middle plays a central role in this conception, as it is about preventing excess and waste as much as it is about living comfortably and with not too few resources. It is about finding a balance without "denying ourselves anything" and with a strong normative conviction that the "right" patterns of consumption and the "right" way of living and housing are also ethically good – "sustainable, healthy and cost-conscious". The *Lagom* trend is currently very strong and can be found in numerous publications and contexts. This and other "less is more" trends entail implicit and explicit references to notions of adequacy, moderation, mediocrity and middle. They promise to contribute to a better life in different areas by setting the boundaries against too much consumption, things or waste. However, they also draw a line of demarcation from too little: The lifestyle that is alluded to involves comfort, balance and well-being; it is not precarious or characterized by scarcity and getting by. It is about finding the right measure and amount of furnishings, belongings and consumption. While it includes conscious spending and economizing, the concept of moderation entailed in it is related more to "good averages" and "happy mediums" than to dearth and abstinence.
The different publications and advertisements – with and without the catchy *Lagom* label – do not generally foreground external constrictions leading to the necessity to reduce or declutter. While crowding and increasing rents are alluded to and portrayed as influencing variables, they are not the main focus. Instead, positive aspects are put

on center stage, such as the functionality of interior design solutions or furniture. Yet, these positive aspects are not limited to functional or practical benefits of the furniture or styles advertised. They, furthermore, stretch to ethical issues, as the conceptions in advertisements, trade fairs and publications are coupled with issues of sustainability, environmental protection, health and creativity. Advertisements including ethical presuppositions, for example, for organic food or renewable energy, work with assumptions of the "value-base of the audience" (Fenwick and Wharton 2013: 45). Similar to the marketing of fair trade products (Quaas 2015; Winterberg 2017), parts of the furniture industry, including manufacturers, retailers and designers, pick up values in their campaigns and representations to cater to the expectation of their audience. As normatively laden imaginaries, they are connected – most directly – not only to discussions on the benefits of living in small spaces, but also, more generally, to debates on post-growth or degrowth, on ethical consumption and sustainability as well as to discussions on "minimalism", "decluttering" and so forth. They stretch from advertisements by large retailers like *Tchibo* or *IKEA* to magazines and the high price segment of furniture displayed at furniture fairs and smaller stores in Cologne. The consumption of specific styles promises to be not only esthetically pleasing, but also ethically just.

Esthetics of Minimalism and Modesty

References to the middle, to mediocrity or to *Lagom* in the field of housing are closely connected to esthetic dimensions. Trends such as references to Japanese interior design and minimalism feature strongly in advertisements and publications – conscious spending has an esthetic dimension.[3] "Trend consultant" Gudy Herder identified "Refined Raw" as one of the upcoming trends in interior design in a review of *IMM* 2017: "In a world ruled by accumulation including fast fashion, this consumer has a deep desire for going back to the simple and most essential. It's all about consuming less but better" (Herder 2016).

The slogan "less but better" was also used as a design principle by product designer Dieter Rams (1995), who focused on high quality, functional products. It is not constricted to quantity or to the build quality of furniture or accessories but entails a distinct esthetic dimension. "Better" describes not only material and workmanship, but also design principles and style. There is a clear trend in interior design towards small, functional and high quality furniture adhering to these principles and styles. This trend is also visible in the supply of furniture stores in and next to the *Rathenauviertel* in

3 The number of books on living in small spaces on the German market has increased drastically over the last couple of years. Most of them share explicit references to the positive aspects of smaller flats, minimal design and general moderation in life.

Cologne; it is shared not only in the respective publications, shops and professional discourses, but also in the furnishings of my interviewees which are following these trends. With reference to Rolf Linder and Lutzer Musner's notion of "landscapes of taste and consumption", trend districts such as the *Rathenauviertel* feature form language in shop windows and the interior design of cafes (Lindner and Musner 2005).

This has tangible influences on the production of furniture. The *Association of the German Furniture Industry (Verband der Deutschen Möbelindustrie)*, highlights that sofas today take up 30 percent less space than six years ago without compromising comfort, *IKEA* increases the production of smaller beds, and producers of kitchen cabinets reintroduce sliding door designs from the 1960s in an effort to supply space saving designs (Haimann 2016). This can be understood primarily as a result of a development towards smaller flats and rooms, particularly in bigger cities where crowding and increasing rents are a problem. Furniture producers and retailers react to developments on the housing market, be it directly by surveying the market or indirectly by responding to their clients' demands for smaller furniture. Such production shifts take into account esthetic trends, so that smaller and more functional furniture fit, in use of forms and design. This is, of course, not the case for all producers, types of furniture and price segments: "Less but better" and minimalist approaches are selective trends among a myriad of other developments. However, orientations towards the "middle" have an influence on esthetics and their materializations. They impact the production of a segment of furniture and shape esthetic perceptions of "good" design which is not wasteful or too much. Among certain social groups, they have an increasing appeal, as mirrored in the representation of this esthetic in publications, trade fairs, furniture shops, shop windows and flats. Vice versa, current esthetic trends of modesty and their materializations have an influence on orientations towards the middle: The supply of furniture styles and their prevalence in furniture shops which are in vogue have the ability to bolster the orientations attached to it. The rhetoric surrounding esthetics of minimalism and modesty is quite explicit: *Lagom* and other arguments for moderation are posited as promises for a happier and healthier life without waste and excessive consumption. The values of the audience are assumed by advertising normative consumption patterns; at the same time, the representation of norms also leads to their diffusion to audiences not necessarily ascribing to them.[4] There is an interdependence between the esthetics of minimalism and moderation, on the one hand, and orientations towards the middle, on the other.

Furnishings are not constricted to functionality, their esthetic content not to appearance. What Maria Schwertl describes for specific objects such as images, flags or

4 It is, however, difficult to assess to what extent this diffusion of norms by advertisements or publications is pertinent and stable, cf. Leach and Liu (1998).

religious artefacts in the flats of first- and second-generation immigrants from Turkey holds true for furnishings in general as well: They have the potential to be "objects of identification" (Schwertl 2010: 14 f.), carrying meaning and hinting at social values and perceptions. The preference for or the prevalence of specific esthetics hints at social meanings. Daniel Miller argues that every day "things" can be an expression of social meaning (Miller 2010), a perspective that is also present in the notion of *Dingbedeutsamkeit* ("remarkableness of a thing", Kramer 1995), highlighting the social and meaningful relations of things and their social embeddedness. Much like things allow analytic access to their social meaning and to the meaning of things for the social (Groth 2015: 60), I would argue that this is also the case for the esthetic dimension of things. It can be understood as both having an impact on perceptions of happy mediums or good averages and being an expression of them. Elisabeth Katschnig-Fasch has made the case that "perceptions of life, norms and belief" are manifest in housing modalities of individuals (Katschnig-Fasch 1998: 10) – esthetic dimensions are part of these modalities.

Housing and Public Spaces

Orientations in urban housing towards to the middle are not constricted to private spaces, they also stretch to public spaces. In the case of the *Rathenauviertel* and other trend districts, modalities of housing include not only buildings and flats, but also the surroundings in the form of public infrastructure, parks, cafés and bars. While the attractiveness of buildings in districts is an important factor, the appeal of trend districts such as the *Rathenauviertel* is argued mostly with reference to public life and its possibilities:

> During the day, the *Rathenauplatz* [the central park in the district] is an attractive meeting place for families and inhabitants of the district. Boule players toss their boules balls and parents enjoy a freshly drafted beer in the open-air pub while the kids rollick about in the playground. On mild summer evenings, the district gets crowded, the seats get scant and mostly younger people meet in the meadows. Here, too, people touch glasses, but cozily with drinks from the kiosk (koeln.de n. d.).

Here and in other publications, the social life of the district is highlighted to illustrate its attractiveness. To some extent, such a description is common for most districts. However, in the case of the *Rathenauviertel* and other trend districts, the possibility to use the public space for leisure activities differs from the enumeration of a district's advantages, such as the vicinity to supermarkets, schools and transportation. The promise entailed in such descriptions is that parks and other public infrastructure

provide extra space in the direct environment to spend time with friends and family. The neighborhood is marketed as a space which has the potential to bridge the gap between public and private space. A local magazine from Cologne described this relation between the private and the public regarding the development towards smaller flats as follows: "We will live in/on smaller spaces: The rural flight continues and high rents in large cities pushes us into smaller flats. In the process, the formerly public space of the city becomes more private" (CityNEWS 2016).

With the trend towards smaller apartments, due to the force of circumstances and conscious decisions to live in specific districts, an orientation towards public spaces in the city can be observed. Rhetorically, the appeal of the *Rathenauviertel* is coupled with the possibility to use the public space, in the form of parks and playgrounds, as quasi-private spaces. The shift to public spaces constitutes a distinct politics of space, claiming public spaces and their interpretation from a privileged position. Public spaces play a big role in the appeal of the district in interviews with inhabitants of the *Rathenauviertel*. Here, the possibility of using public space in this way influences perceptions of living conditions and of the size of apartments: They are referred to as alternative spaces which can be used in addition to private spaces of flats and commercial spaces such as cafés and bar.

This relation between public and private spaces in which the public space is enhanced in its status from a privileged position is worth closer scrutiny. Sharing some of the presuppositions, it is in contrast to efforts to "reclaim the city", for example, by the British social center movement (Hodkinson and Chatterton 2007), by developments stemming from the "right to the city" concept (Harvey 2008; Lefebvre 1968) and creative initiatives to rethink modes of participation in the city (Huber 2018). While such processes position themselves against the commodification of private spaces (Bojadžijev 2016) or increased efforts of policing (Eisch-Angus 2011a, 2011b), the appropriation of public space as private in trend districts is not *per se* or explicitly connected to normative claims. It is focused mainly on the existing possibility to use and consume space, not on claims to extend it or strengthen participatory processes. With its positive attitude towards public space as a given commodity and the related position to use it, it is harnessed by city marketing, local businesses and developers as a competitive advantage. Much as historic conservation and heritage programs are increasingly used as justification for urban gentrification processes (Collins 2008; Franquesa 2013; Herzfeld 2010), perceptions of public spaces are altered: They are seen as something of high social value in times of changes in urban housing and are translated into economic value. Orientations towards the middle in housing are accordingly not constricted to the private spaces of flats but have an influence on the use and interpretation of public spaces as well: As attractive districts, potential for development and spaces of consumption.

Negotiating Appropriateness as Social Practice

Debates on modesty and mediocrity, their medial occurrence and the use of public space alter conditions of appropriateness for urban housing. They have an influence on what is deemed appropriate in terms of size, rent, number of rooms, furnishings and location. Prices of 12.50 EUR or higher per square meter and small apartments would be considered to be too expensive or too small in other districts or cities. In trend districts like the *Rathenauviertel*, however, rents and sizes like this are accepted because of the advantages offered by the location. Conditions of appropriateness apply to rent prices and to the size of flats. Concepts of "good averages" and "happy mediums" come into play as the relation between minimal requirements and available space is negotiated. Here, too, flats are expected to be adequate in size and price, not too expensive and not too small, but in relation to their location in a relatively expensive district. The demarcation is made both against too little and too much, defining a space of appropriate conditions. The combination of factors, such as crowding, a competitive housing market in attractive districts and their appeal to specific social groups, establish perceptions of appropriate and – to some extent – also normalized conditions of living for these groups.

The negotiation of appropriateness is situated and flexible (Groth 2015: 75 f.). It is contingent on social relations, the characteristics of urban living, income, personal requirements, such as the possibility to commute to work, or to fulfill other infrastructural needs (e.g. shopping, education). As my research on the *Rathenauviertel* and representations in advertisements, magazines, blogs and interior design have shown, it uses references to "less is more", "less is better", concepts like *Lagom* and other orientations towards the middle to locate levels of appropriateness in urban housing. Furthermore, conditions of appropriateness entail ethical aspects. They make reference to debates on sustainability and minimalism (Derwanz 2015), post- or degrowth (Groth 2015; Poehls 2014, 2016) or ethical consumption (Carrier and Luetchford 2012; Luetchford 2016) to make sense of and rationalize such orientations towards "good averages" and "happy mediums" as good and ethically just. Thus, appropriateness as a normative concept (Merker et al. 1998) is constructed in interviews and publications with reference to multiple strains of discourse, ranging from personal needs and ethical claims to social relations and infrastructural factors.

Despite this flexibility and situatedness, perceptions and assumptions of appropriateness have specific materializations. They have an impact on the size of furniture, on design trends and on their representation in publications. As they are materialized in such form, they gain stability and influence. However, new and modified perceptions of appropriateness are not limited to tenants, magazine writers, bloggers or designers; they stretch to financial logics and planning processes as well. Real estate investors and

developers refer to mobile and flexible lifestyles and the benefits of smaller units when they rationalize the development of smaller, high quality units (Maneco n. d.). Crowding in urban areas and high rents are argued to be the main factors for an increasing demand for smaller flats. However, this is portrayed partly as a positive development with reference to arguments such as sustainability, functionality or the appeal of a combined kitchen and living room (Psotta 2014). However flexible or ephemeral references to the middle in urban housing by inhabitants in trend districts or in publications are, they are taken up and gain traction in political and economic processes, justifying and altering shifts in the perception of appropriate housing.[5]

Conclusion

There is an interplay between several aspects in references to the middle and neighboring terms such as modesty, *Lagom* or averages. For one, a form of sweet-talking of the pressures which the social groups in highly attractive trend districts experience can be observed. Tenants of small apartments in the *Rathenauviertel* justify their living modalities with perceptions of the middle, taking up normative frames ranging from moderation to issues of sustainability and critical consumption.[6] Such justifications are constituted communicatively and give insight into their normative foundations (Bergmann and Luckmann 2013),[7] which are not necessarily stable and systematized, but can be spontaneously invoked and altered.[8] While negative effects such as crowding, high rents and spatial constrictions are, in principle, acknowledged, they are backgrounded, as positive aspects are highlighted as a form of justification. These are further tied to new and changing esthetics and design trends, emphasizing minimalism or modesty and – either implicitly or explicitly – related to debates on degrowth and sustainability.

5 This is, of course, not only the case for urban housing in trend districts. Perceptions of appropriate housing conditions in terms of cost and size are contingent upon political processes and economic pressures, particularly in precarious housing situations. While tenants in trend districts can afford the rent, but voluntarily limit themselves to smaller flats on order to live in attractive inner-city areas, the low-income sector is faced by harder restrictions, cf. Rötzer (2010).

6 A further worthwhile strand of inquiry would be to probe into the different orders of justification on which these references are based and to analyze their interplay, i.e. to scrutinize when and how they are referred to and how differences between them are made sense of (cf. Boltanski and Thevenot 2007).

7 The project aims to show, in a further step, how such justifications are integrated into biographical narratives to make sense of performances and choices in different fields of practice, such as housing, work and leisure (Lehmann 1980).

8 See Lambek (2010, 2015) on the discussion on "ordinary ethics," which takes up the question whether the evocation of ethical rules is based on complex value systems or rather embodied in and as practice.

Moreover, they are connected to shifting perceptions of public spaces and alter conditions of appropriateness.

While this case study on urban housing and references to the middle is limited to a specific social group of inhabitants of trend districts, perceptions of "good averages" and "happy mediums" are prevalent beyond this field. The occurrence of the "middle" in diverse fields of practice hints at a pervasive social comparative towards the middle as a competitive form. It aims at not too much but, at the same time, tries to avoid too little. It creates dimensions for comparison which require effort and are hard to achieve, albeit less hard than reaching the top or belonging to the group of top earners: Here, the metaphoric aim in a competition is not to win, but to belong to a social group oriented towards notions of the middle. Occurrences of the middle are embedded in constellations of questions of taste, virtue, economics and urban conditions. Orientations towards the middle as a specific form of social comparative introduce new criteria of appropriateness for housing and for what is deemed as adequate and acceptable regarding the size, design and location of flats. They mediate between questions of taste, virtue, economics and urban conditions and constitute a discursive interplay between elements of justification and legitimation, on the one hand, and of virtues and social values, on the other hand. The middle is a powerful concept, structuring perceptions, expectations and practices in the realm of housing as well as in other areas.

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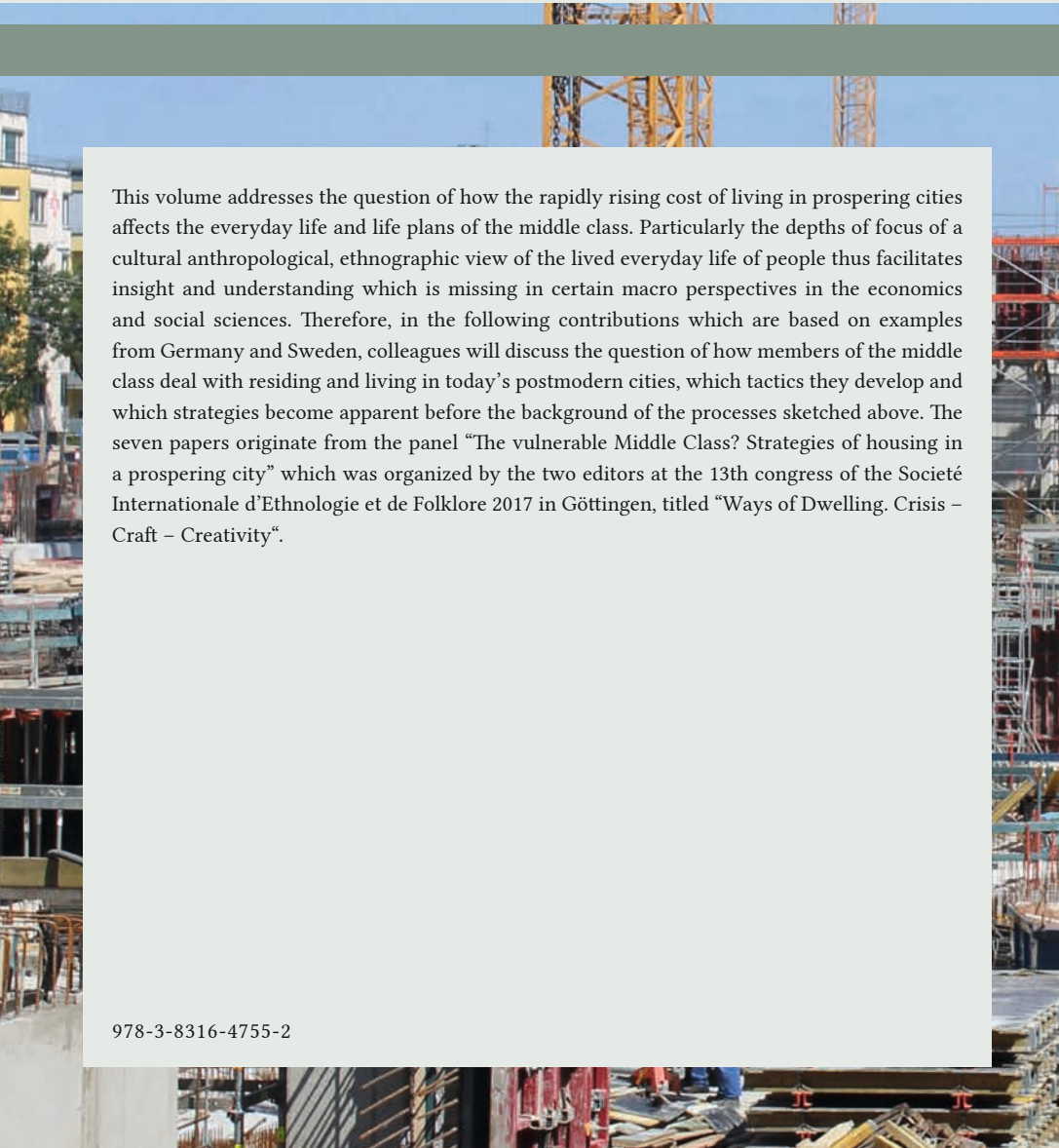

This volume addresses the question of how the rapidly rising cost of living in prospering cities affects the everyday life and life plans of the middle class. Particularly the depths of focus of a cultural anthropological, ethnographic view of the lived everyday life of people thus facilitates insight and understanding which is missing in certain macro perspectives in the economics and social sciences. Therefore, in the following contributions which are based on examples from Germany and Sweden, colleagues will discuss the question of how members of the middle class deal with residing and living in today's postmodern cities, which tactics they develop and which strategies become apparent before the background of the processes sketched above. The seven papers originate from the panel "The vulnerable Middle Class? Strategies of housing in a prospering city" which was organized by the two editors at the 13th congress of the Societé Internationale d'Ethnologie et de Folklore 2017 in Göttingen, titled "Ways of Dwelling. Crisis – Craft – Creativity".

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